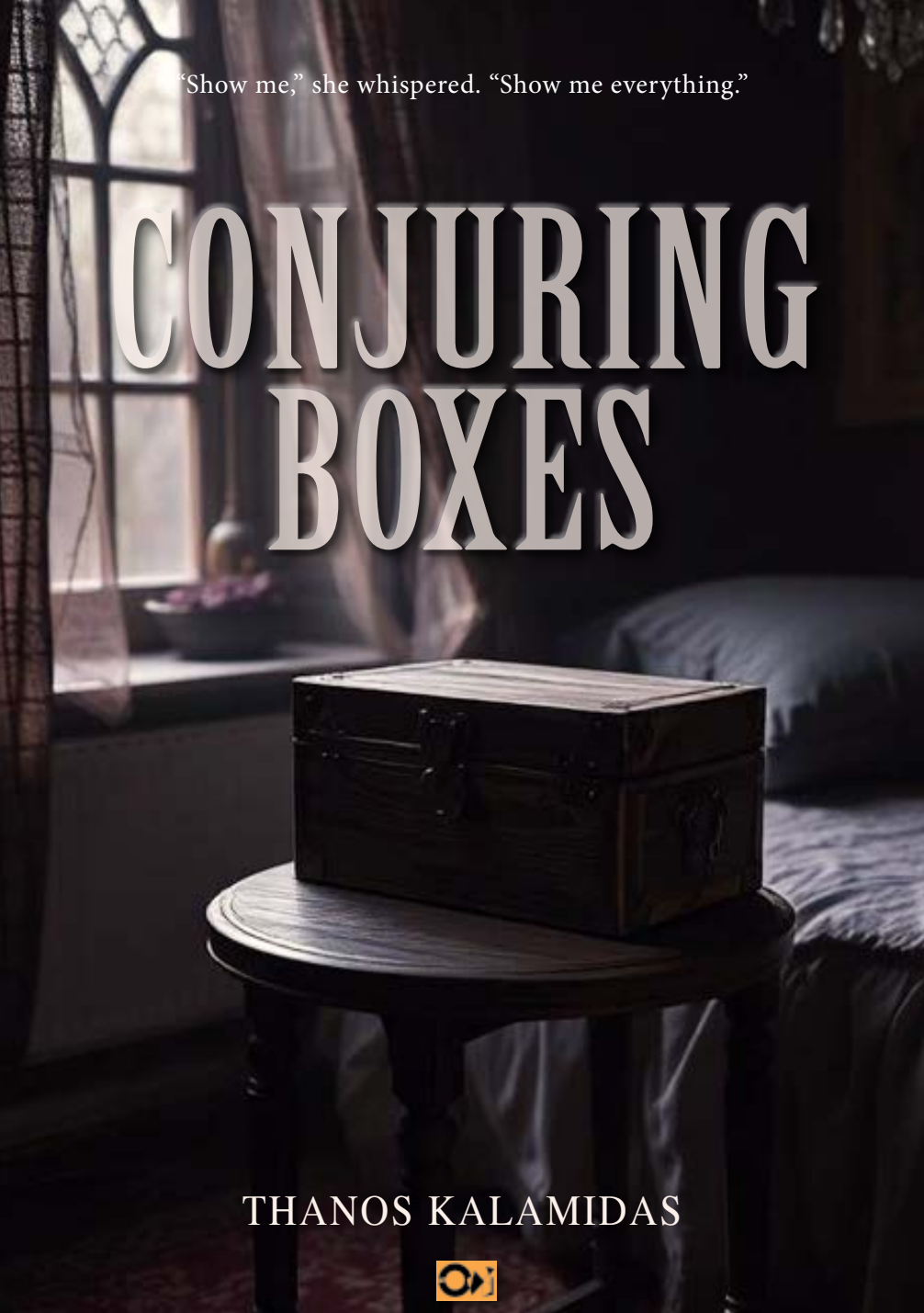
"Show me," she whispered. "Show me everything."
CONJURING BOXES
THANOS KALAMIDAS

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Thanos Kalamidas

Conjuring boxes

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The box was warm. A low, pulsing heat. Like a fever.

Sara hadn't meant to touch it again. She'd spent three gruelling weeks playing a game of mental tug-of-war, telling herself she was done. But there it sat. 3:47 AM. The "Dead Zone." The cube glowed on her nightstand, a dying ember in the dark, whispering to her without making a sound. Her fingers reached out, acting on a reflex her brain hadn't authorised yet.

Heat. It was always the heat.

She'd found the damn thing six months ago. It had been hiding, tucked behind Hugo's *Les Misérables* on the shelf Max had abandoned, along with his promises and his life with her. A small black cube. No big-

ger than a matchbox. Smooth as polished obsidian. Cold as a grave until you touched it. The first time she'd picked it up, it had hissed. It burned so badly she'd dropped it, the skin on her palm bubbling into an angry, white blister.

Max had never mentioned it. He hadn't come back for it. He hadn't even spared it a glance when he'd packed his Italian suits, his expensive shoes, and his suffocating arrogance.

Now, she held it between her thumb and forefinger. She watched the faint, rhythmic pulse of light deep within its core.

Thump-thump.

It wasn't a machine. It was a heartbeat. The thing was *alive*.

"Show me," she whispered. Her voice was a dry rasp in the empty room. "Show me everything."

The box didn't just respond. It screamed into her mind.

Images flooded her, not blurry dreams but high-definition nightmares.

Clair. The blonde fiancée. The "upgrade."

She was in their pristine penthouse kitchen, bathed in marble and moonlight. Clair was alone, humming a mindless tune, pouring a glass of vintage Chardonnay. She was oblivious. Content.

Then, the shadow appeared.

It wasn't a person. It was a void. A silhouette of pure malice materialising behind her. Sara watched, frozen, as the shadow coiled around Clair's throat like a physical weight. She watched the woman claw at the air, her face turning a sickening shade of plum, her legs kicking uselessly against the designer cabinetry.

Crunch. Clair fell.

The image jerked. A new scene. Max. Central Station. The morning rush. He was checking his Patek Philippe, looking annoyed and radiating that signature "the world is beneath me" energy. The shadow was there, too. Coalescing. Drifting behind him like a dark thought.

One shove.

The roar of the 8:05 express.

The screech of metal.

Sara dropped the box.

It clattered onto the hardwood floor, the visions vanishing instantly. But the *knowing* stayed. It sat in her gut like lead. The box hadn't shown her the future; it had shown her a menu. A hit list. It didn't predict; it *offered*.

She'd spent the last six months trying to kill it.

She'd tried a blowtorch. The flame licked the obsidian and died. She'd submerged it in the bathtub for three days. The water stayed boiling. She'd even driven to Newark, through the industrial rot, and tossed it into a chemical plant dumpster.

She'd walked back into her flat an hour later. There it was. Waiting on her nightstand. Smug.

The box wanted something. It wanted a hand to hold it. It wanted a heart to fuel it.

"You're hungry, aren't you?" she murmured staring at the cube on the floor.

It pulsed. Once. A dark, affirmative wink.

Sara stood up, her mind suddenly, terrifyingly clear. She knew what she had to do. She wasn't going to hide it anymore. She wasn't going to fear it.

Max wanted everything in the breakup. He wanted the house, the accounts and the dignity. Fine. He could have one more thing.

"Pack your bags, you little monster," Sara said, a cold smile touching her lips. "We're going to pay Max a visit."

Tonight, she was going to give it to him. And Max was finally going to get exactly what was coming to him.

The last supper

The waiter arrived with my second bourbon, wearing the kind of apologetic enthusiasm you only see in people who know they've botched the first act and are desperate for a standing ovation. He placed the glass on the napkin. Neatly. Precisely. The corners of the paper aligned perfectly with the edge of the mahogany table.

I decided I'd tip him anyway. It wasn't the kid's fault the bartender was a chauvinist with a predictable weakness for short skirts and hairspray.

"You're good," I said, my voice sounding raspy even to my own ears.

The kid blinked, frozen. "Ma'am?"

"The napkin. The alignment. You've got an eye for the details."

He looked down at the coaster as if he'd just discovered fire. "Oh. Yeah. My mum..." He stopped, his face flushing a deep, embarrassed crimson.

I let a smile find my lips. It felt strange, like a muscle I hadn't flexed in a lifetime. "Tell your mum she raised a gentleman. Don't let this place ruin that."

He retreated, flustered but wearing a grin that probably bought him another hour of sanity in this dive. I turned my gaze back to the door.

Still no Max.

I checked my watch. Twenty-three minutes late. Standard operating procedure. Max lived on "creative time," a curated reality where the rest of the world stayed on pause until he decided to grace us with his presence. His needs were the sun; the rest of us were just space dust caught in his gravity.

Clair would learn that soon enough. Poor, sweet Clair was going to learn a lot of things the hard way.

Inside my purse, the box sat like a hot coal. I could feel it through the leather, radiating an impossible,

pulsing heat. It never burned through the bag, but it never cooled down either. It was alive in there. Waiting.

What are you?

I'd whispered that question a thousand times in the last six months. The box didn't do words. It did *want*. It fed on the dark, jagged edges of human desire.

At first, it was parlour tricks. A prime parking spot in the rain. The last almond croissant at the bakery. The elevator doors sliding open before my finger even touched the button. I thought I was lucky. I thought I was blessed.

Then the stakes went up.

I'd wished for a promotion for a colleague I despised, just to get him out of my department. He got the job. He also got a terminal diagnosis three weeks later. I wished for a flat tire for the neighbour whose dog barked at 3:00 AM. He didn't just get a flat; he spun out on the I-95.

I stopped using it two months ago. The breaking point was the Korean deli across the street. I was tired of the smell of kimchi every morning. I had a fleeting, petty thought, *I wish they'd just close up shop.*

The next morning, Mr. Kwan's heart gave out. He survived, barely, but the deli's metal shutters stayed down for a month.

I'd tried to scream at the box. I'd tried to drown it, bury it, toss it into the East River. It didn't matter. It always found its way back to my bedside table, humming with a quiet, expectant hunger.

So, tonight was the hand-off.

Max wanted everything? Fine. I'd give him everything. I'd give him the power to turn his darkest, most fleeting impulses into reality. I wanted to see how long he'd last before the guilt started eating him from the inside out. Or worse, to see if he felt any guilt at all.

I took a long, burning pull of the bourbon and kept my eyes glued to the door.

Come on, Max. I've got a gift for you.

The collector

Max arrived twenty-nine minutes late.

In Max's world, that was early.

Sara spotted him before he saw her. He was doing that thing he always did—the predatory scan. Eyes darting. Cataloguing the exits. Assessing the threats. Sizing up the opportunities. Old habits from a life she'd never fully understood. A life lived in the shadows of the "deal."

He'd aged. Six months since the breakup, and the world had carved its signature into his face. The bald head was the same, polished and hard, but the lines around his eyes had cratered. His posture was different, too. Tense. Like a spring wound too tight.

Good, she thought. *Let him look over his shoulder. Let him feel the weight.*

He finally locked onto her. That smile slid into place, the one she'd once lived for. The one that whispered, *There you are. My world is complete.* She felt the old pull, that sickening magnetic tug of Max Cartwright. Collector of fine art. Collector of rare coins. Collector of women. He kept things until the shine wore off. Then he curated something new.

He was sporting a new scarf. Charcoal cashmere. Expensive. Probably a gift from Clair. The thought sat in her stomach like a lead weight.

"Still looking after me, Sara?" He slid into the booth. He didn't look at her. Not really. He looked at the drink.

"Old habits, Max. They don't just die. They haunt you."

"A Manhattan?" He gestured at the glass. "You remembered."

"You're a hard man to forget, Max. Believe me, I've tried."

He shot her a glance. Sharp. Assessing. Then it was

gone. He took a sip, nodding at the bite of the vermouth. “You look good. New hair?”

“No.”

“Something’s different.” His eyes were back on the room. Scanning the patrons. Checking the door. Always the exits. “You seem... settled. Quiet.”

“I am settled. Because I’m done, Max. I’m truly done.” She wrapped her fingers around her own glass. The cold was the only thing keeping her grounded. “I’m done with the anger. Done with the midnight rehearsals of what I’d say to you. I’m done with all of it.”

She reached into her purse. Her knuckles brushed the small box. It felt hot. Pulsing.

“You left something at the apartment,” she said.

Max’s hand froze. Mid-air. The mask slipped for a fraction of a second, and she saw it. Raw, unadulterated fear. Then the shutters slammed back down.

“What thing?” his voice was a low rasp.

“A box. Small. Black. Tucked behind Hugo’s *Les Misérables*. Quite the poetic hiding spot, don’t you think?”

Max went stone-still. “You touched it.”

“I did.”

“How many times, Sara? Exactly how many times?”

The casual disinterest was gone. This was urgent. This was a man staring at a ticking bomb.

“Enough,” she replied, her voice steady despite the hammer in her chest. “What the hell is it, Max?”

He didn’t answer. He was staring at her purse now, his mind whirring. She could practically hear the gears grinding, weighing the risks, calculating the escape. *Always the strategist.*

“Give it to me,” he commanded. “Now. Don’t think. Don’t linger. Don’t make a wish on it. Just slide it over.”

“Wish on it?” Sara pulled her hand back, leaving the heat in the bag. “What are you talking about? It’s a box, not a birthday candle.”

Max leaned in. The intensity was physical. It pinned her against the vinyl of the booth. “Sara, listen to me, and listen well. That object is a contagion. It’s not metaphorically dangerous. It’s a literal threat to your life. That’s why I left it behind.”

"You left it because you were in a hurry to move into Clair's penthouse."

"No!" He hissed the word. "I left it because I couldn't destroy the damn thing and I couldn't bear to carry it anymore. I thought if I tucked it away, if I put it in a 'dead' zone where no one would find it, I could breathe. I thought I'd figure out a plan. But then..."

"Then you found a new life. And you left me in a house with a cursed relic." The words were flat. The fire was gone, replaced by a cold, numbing exhaustion.

"I was trying to protect you," he whispered.

"From a box? Max, listen to yourself."

"It's a *conjuring box*," he snapped. "Do you even understand what that implies? It doesn't work like a storybook. There's no genie. No three wishes. It's worse. It feeds on the subconscious. It grants the wishes you don't even know you're making. The dark thoughts. The passing resentments. The 'I wish he'd just shut up' moments."

Sara's heart stopped. She thought of the Korean deli. Mrs. Kwan's husband. The noise. The smell.

"Mrs. Kwan's husband," she whispered. "I didn't... I didn't want him *dead*. I just wanted the shouting to stop."

Max closed his eyes. A pained grimace. "When?"

"Two months ago. I haven't touched it since. I tried to bin it, but..."

"It comes back. It always finds its way home." He opened his eyes and they were hollow. "Until it's finished with you."

"It's wood and lacquer, Max. It's not a living thing."

"Isn't it? It has an appetite, Sara." He waved for another round. He needed the liquid courage. "I found it twelve years ago in Marrakech. The dealer was terrified. He practically begged me not to take it. Said it brought 'the rot.' I laughed. I thought I was smarter than a desert superstition."

"You always do."

"I used it. Small things. A promotion. A parking spot. A winning horse. I thought I was the king of the world. Then the patterns emerged. The people I was angry at, they didn't just lose. They suffered. The guy who cut me off? His life imploded. A rival at the

firm? Stage four cancer. I never *asked* for that. But I thought it. Just for a heartbeat."

"And the box made it flesh."

Max nodded. "I went cold turkey. Six months. I thought I was free. Then I got into a row with a contractor, screaming, blinding rage. The next day, he was a smear on the M1. Totally random. A blowout. But I knew. I hadn't even seen the box in months, but I was carrying it in my soul. It didn't need a touch anymore. It just needed my *want*."

The air in the bar felt thin. Sara's skin crawled. She thought of the long, lonely nights. The mental images of Max's car going over a cliff. The poison she'd imagined in his coffee.

"Clair," she said, her voice cracking. "Is she alright?"

Max's face turned ashen. "Why would you ask that?"

"Because when I touched it last night... I saw something. A shadow. Around her throat."

Max stared into the middle distance. "She's alive. But three weeks ago, she stopped breathing in her sleep. Woke up clawing at her neck. Said it felt like

invisible hands were squeezing the life out of her. She had the bruises for ten days, Sara. Fingerprints. My fingerprints."

Sara felt like she was drowning.

"The box is courting you," Max said. "It's showing you its power. It wants a new master. And once it has you, it never lets go."

"Then why did you leave it with me?" The anger flared, red and hot. "If you knew it was a predator, why leave it in my home? Why didn't you warn me?"

"Because I'm a coward!" Max barked. "Because I wanted to be Max Cartwright again, the man without a shadow. I told myself you were too sensible to find it. I told myself I'd come back for it. But the more I stayed away, the more I feared it. I traded your safety for my peace of mind."

Sara drained her drink. The bourbon burned, a sharp reality in a world turned surreal.

"So, what's the play, Max? You always have a play."

Max pulled a folded sheet of paper from his pocket. It was covered in frantic, dense handwriting. Diagrams. Symbols. Notes in different inks.

"The man in Marrakech... he told me there was a way to kill it. A ritual of unmaking. But it's specific. It needs the box, the last person who used it, and the person who birthed it."

"The Moroccan seller?"

Max shook his head. "He was just a middleman. The original creator, the one who bound the shadows into the wood, she's still out there. In Prague."

"Prague? Max, the box is decades old. Centuries, maybe."

"Time works differently for some, Sara. She's known as The Collector. She's made several of these things over the years. This is the last one. The others were destroyed by people who were braver than I was." He looked at her purse with pure loathing. "This one has been hiding for fifty years. I found it by accident. Or maybe it found me."

"How can you be sure about this woman?"

"Because I've spent every waking second of the last six months researching. I haven't been 'moving on,' Sara. I've been running. And I'm exhausted." He reached across the table. For the first time in forever, he actually took her hand. His palm was cold. "I'm

sorry. For everything. But we have to go. Together."

"Together? I'm not part of this."

"The box says otherwise. You touched it. You used it, even if you didn't mean to. It's marked you, Sara. You can feel it, can't you? That pull in your gut?"

She looked down at her bag. She could feel it. A low-frequency hum vibrating against her hip.

"If we don't do this," Max whispered, "it will keep feeding. It will turn our darkest impulses into reality. And eventually..."

"Eventually what?"

"Eventually, it will run out of our wishes. And then the box will start making wishes of its own."

The night train

They took the red-eye to Prague. Max insisted on speed. Sara insisted on not giving the box time to "think."

She wasn't sure if an object made of wood and silver could possess a consciousness but after the nightmares Max had described, she wasn't taking any chances.

The plane was a ghost ship, half-empty and smelling of stale coffee. They found three seats near the galley. Max claimed the window. Sara took the aisle. Between them sat her purse, heavy with the weight of a judgment they hadn't earned yet.

"You should sleep," Max said. His voice was a low rasp somewhere over the black Atlantic.

"I can't."

"Try. Tomorrow is going to be a long day. Maybe our last long day."

Sara looked at him, really looked at him, for the first time since he'd crashed back into her life at the bar. The overhead LEDs carved jagged shadows into his face. He looked more than tired. He looked *haunted*. Forty-three? No. He looked a century old.

"What happened to you?" she whispered. "After you dumped that thing on me and vanished. What really happened, Max?"

Silence stretched between them, thick and suffocating. For a moment, she thought he'd bolt. Then, his shoulders sagged.

"I met Clair," he said. "I thought she was the antidote. Young. Beautiful. Adoring. She made me feel like the man I used to be, the man before the box poisoned everything."

"The honeymoon phase," Sara said, the bitterness leaking out.

"It was perfect for a few months. Truly perfect. I told myself I'd come back for the box, eventually. But there was always a reason to wait. A holiday in St. Barts. A deadline at the firm. A dinner with her parents. I convinced myself the box was a ghost I'd left behind. I was living in the light, Sara."

"But the shadows don't just stay behind because you ask them to, do they?"

"No." He rubbed his face with trembling hands. "It was following me. Not like a stalker, I had no idea you still had it until tonight. But it was *there*. Every time I lost my temper at a barista, they'd trip and scald themselves. Every time I had a dark thought, it manifested. It was like my subconscious had been weaponised."

"You were using it," she realised. "Without even touching it."

"Using it? No, Sara. The box was using *me*. It was feeding. I didn't see the truth until three weeks ago. I woke up and saw Clair. She had these... these finger-shaped bruises on her neck."

His voice cracked, a dry, brittle sound.

"I hadn't touched her. I love her. But we'd fought

that day. She'd made a mess of our finances, and I'd spent an hour pacing the office, fantasising about..." He stopped, his eyes wide and glassed over.

"About what, Max?"

"About shaking her," he choked out. "Just shaking her until she understood the gravity of it. I didn't mean it. I'm not a violent man. But the box... it doesn't care about intent."

"It only hears the hunger," Sara said.

"It heard me. And it almost killed the woman I love. If I'd been angrier... if I'd imagined something worse..."

Sara reached across the empty seat and took his hand. It was a reflex, a ghost of a habit from a decade ago. It didn't feel romantic. It felt like two survivors clinging to the same piece of driftwood in a storm.

"We'll fix this," she promised. "Tomorrow. We find this Collector, we hand over the box, and we walk away. It ends in Prague."

Max stared at her, his gaze searching hers for a lie. "You really believe that?"

"No," she said, her voice steady. "But I'm going to pretend I do until the world proves me wrong."

He let out a short, sharp laugh, a genuine sound that didn't belong in this gloom. "God, I missed you, Sara. Your pragmatism is a lifeline."

"Don't," she snapped, pulling her hand back.

"I know. I don't have the right. I lost that right a long time ago. But I missed you anyway."

Sara turned away, staring out at the void beyond the plexiglass. Below them lay the ocean, cold, deep and indifferent to the tiny, terrified humans screaming across the sky.

"Tell me about the Collector," she said. "Tell me exactly who we're dealing with."

The collector's legacy

Max's research hadn't just taken him to strange places. It had taken him to the brink of sanity.

The Collector. She was a ghost story told in a dozen languages. A shadow stitched into the tapestry of history. In medieval France, they whispered of *La Dame des Ombres,* the Lady of Shadows. In the sun-drenched plazas of Renaissance Italy, she was *La Signora della Notte*. Ottoman scribes, usually so precise, simply noted her as "the woman who gathers what should never be found."

"She's been crafting these conjuring boxes for five hundred years," Max said. His voice was a low rasp, competing with the hum of the jet engines. "Maybe longer. The first hard evidence? 1472. Prague."

He leaned in, his eyes dark with a feverish sort of knowledge. “A merchant named Vladislav Horak bought a small, obsidian-black box from a woman who didn’t seem to age. Three months later, Horak was a corpse. The Church blamed the plague. The Church was wrong.”

“How wrong?” Sara asked. The cabin air felt suddenly thin.

“The symptoms were a biological impossibility. It wasn’t the Black Death; it was a fast-forward button on mortality. Rapid, violent senescence. Horak went from a robust forty to a skeletal ninety in twenty-one days. His hair didn’t just fall out; it drifted off him like ash. His skin turned to parchment; his bones became glass. By the end, he was a living statue. Paralysed. Mute. But his eyes...” Max shivered. “The records say his eyes never stopped moving. They followed his family around the room, screaming in silence until his heart finally gave up.”

Sara felt a cold coil of nausea in her gut. “The box did that?”

“The box was the engine. Horak’s greed was the fuel,” Max said. “He wrote a final confession to his

son. He'd achieved it all, gold, titles, absolute fealty. But the price was a sick irony. The wealth? It came from his partner's 'accidental' drowning. The power? Built on the corpses of rivals. The respect? It was just a mask for pure, unadulterated terror. He was the most powerful man in Prague and the most utterly alone. He couldn't undo a single wish. The box doesn't have a 'delete' key, Sara."

"How can you be so sure? About the letter?"

"It's not a myth. It's sitting in a climate-controlled vault in the Prague National Archives." Max swiped his phone, revealing a photograph of brittle, yellowed parchment. The handwriting was a frantic, cramped scrawl. "The son tried to burn the box. The wood wouldn't catch. He threw it in the Vltava River; it turned up on his doorstep the next morning, dry as a bone. Eventually, he hunted her down. The Collector. He begged her on bleeding knees to take it back."

"And?"

"She took it. With a smile, apparently. Then she vanished for a century. She popped up again in 1588, London. Different name, same box, same trail of shattered lives. It's a cycle."

Sara looked down at her handbag. The box was tucked inside, a silent, heavy weight. It felt alive. A dormant predator. “Why? If she knows the misery they cause, why keep making them?”

Max’s expression went grim. “Because I don’t think she’s a manufacturer. I think she’s an observer. She doesn’t just make them, she *harvests* them. She lets them out into the wild, waits for them to gorged themselves on human souls, and then she brings them home. She’s studying the darkness they extract. She’s studying *us*.”

“Like lab rats,” Sara whispered.

“Exactly. She wants to see what the boxes bring to the surface. Our shames. Our secret rot.” He turned his full attention to her. The intensity was suffocating. “What did you wish for, Sara? When it was just you and the box in the dark?”

Sara’s first instinct was to pivot. To give him a sanitised version of the truth. But they were thirty thousand feet in the air, hurtling toward a destiny that didn’t care about her dignity.

“I wished you dead,” she said. The words were shards of glass. “A hundred times. A thousand. I

spent months choreographing your demise. Every night, I'd close my eyes and imagine your car spinning out, or your heart failing, or a stranger in a dark alley. And every time I did..." She choked back a sob.

"The box," Max prompted. "What did it do?"

"It purred," she whispered, her voice trembling. "It got hot in my hands. It felt... *joyful*. It wasn't just a tool, Max. It was an audience. It fed on my spite. It created a feedback loop that made me crave that hatred. I didn't stop because I forgave you. I stopped because I was terrified of the thing I saw in the mirror. I wasn't just a woman scorned anymore. I was a monster in training."

Max didn't flinch. He didn't look away. He just looked tired. "I'm sorry, Sara."

"For what? Being a target?"

"For giving you the ammunition," he said softly. "For being the kind of man who treats women like gallery pieces—beautiful until I've stared at them too long, then discarded. I was a collector, too. Just a much more pathetic one."

"Are you still that man?"

Max looked at his hands, as if checking for blood. "I want to say no. But the box... it's an amplifier. It takes the quietest, ugliest thought you have and turns the volume up to eleven. I spent twelve years wishing for shortcuts. And the box delivered. But it's an addiction. You stop caring about the 'how' as long as you get the 'what'."

"And Clair?" Sara's voice was sharp. "Where does she fit in your collection?"

Max winced. "Clair is light. She's young, she's kind, and God help her, she thinks I'm a hero. But I don't know if I love her, Sara. Or if I'm just using her as a shield against the truth of what I've become. She makes me feel like the man I was before the box showed me my own soul."

Suddenly, the plane bucked. Turbulence slammed into them, a violent reminder of their fragility. The seatbelt sign chimed—a frantic, rhythmic warning. Sara gripped the armrests until her knuckles went white.

"We're a hell of a team," she said, her voice tight as the plane levelled out. "Two broken souls flying to a city of ghosts, carrying a literal Pandora's box that wants to eat us alive."

"We aren't carrying it to our deaths, Sara," Max said, though he sounded like he was trying to convince himself. "We're carrying it to be saved."

Sara looked out the window at the black void of the Atlantic. "Is there a difference?"

Max had no answer for that.

Prague

The wheels slammed onto the tarmac at Václav Havel Airport at 10:47 AM. Local time. My time? My time was a fractured mess of time zones and adrenaline. We were exhausted. Bleary-eyed. Disoriented. I'd managed maybe two hours of fitful sleep; Max looked like he'd been dragged through a hedge backward and hadn't closed his eyes once.

Prague didn't roll out the red carpet. It greeted us with a ceiling of bruised, grey clouds and a spiteful drizzle that soaked through my jacket in seconds. It was the kind of cold that didn't just sit on your skin, it crawled inside your bones and made a home there.

We took a taxi to a narrow, jagged little hotel in Malá Strana. Max's contact. Always a contact. We checked into adjoining rooms on the third floor, the floorboards groaning under our weight like they knew why we were here.

"Rest," Max said, his voice like gravel. "We meet the Collector tonight. Midnight sharp."

"Where?" I asked. My throat felt like I'd swallowed glass.

"Charles Bridge. She'll find us."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I told her we were coming. I've been whispering in her ear for three months." He saw the look on my face, the betrayal, the heat and held up a hand. "I know. I should have told you. But I knew you wouldn't lace up your boots if you knew the trap was already set."

"Maybe I wouldn't have," I snapped.

"Exactly."

I wanted to scream. I wanted to throw something. But the anger was a flickering candle drowned by a

tidal wave of fatigue. The exhaustion that had been my shadow for months had finally settled in, making the world feel distant. Thin. Unreal. I nodded, snatched my key, and retreated to my room.

The bed was soft. The pillows were a cloud. I was dead to the world before my head hit the linen.

I dreamed of the shadows.

They weren't just dark spots on a wall. They were alive. Sentient. They prowled the cobblestone streets of Prague like liquid ink, flowing around corners, seeping through the cracks in the pavement, huddling in the doorways of ancient churches. They had no faces, no limbs, but I felt their gaze. Heavy. Hungry.

Come to us, they hissed. A thousand dry leaves skittering on stone. *We have so much to show you, Sara. So much to give.*

I bolted upright. Heart hammering against my ribs like a trapped bird.

Then I saw it.

The box.

It was sitting right there on my nightstand. Crouched like a gargoyle.

I hadn't put it there. I knew I hadn't. It had been buried in my purse, and my purse was still slumped on the floor by the door, six feet away.

"Max." I fumbled for my phone, my fingers trembling. "Max, wake up. Now."

He picked up on the second ring. Grogginess fought with instinct. "What? What's wrong?"

"The box," I whispered, staring at the dark wood. "It moved."

A long, heavy silence. "Where is it now?"

"On my nightstand. Right next to my head, Max. I didn't touch it."

"Don't. Stay back. I'm coming."

He was at my door in thirty seconds. He was still wearing the same crumpled clothes from the flight, but his eyes were electric. Dangerous. He marched to the nightstand and stared at the thing. He didn't get too close.

"It's getting stronger," he murmured. "It's never jumped like this before. Never on its own."

"Maybe it's homesick," I said, a hysterical edge to my voice. "Maybe it's excited to be back."

Max cut me a sharp look. "That isn't funny, Sara."

"I'm not laughing, Max." I pulled the duvet up to my chin, feeling small. Exposed. "I dreamed about them. The shadows. They were everywhere. They were... watching me. Waiting."

"The box's shadows?"

"I don't know. Does it matter?"

Max sat on the edge of the bed, his weight shifting the mattress. He couldn't take his eyes off the box. "The Collector warned me. She said the closer it gets to the source, the more... *aware* it becomes. It's waking up."

"Aware of what?"

"Of the end. Of being destroyed. If that's what we're actually going to do." He turned his head, locking his gaze onto mine. "Are you sure? Really sure? Once we hand it over to her, there's no 'undo' button. No going

back. It's gone forever."

"I want it gone," I said, though my voice wavered.

"Do you? Because it's been your shadow for six months. It's been mine for twelve years. Twelve years of it whispering to me." He shook his head, a grimace twisting his face. "Letting it go... it's going to feel like losing a limb. Or a lung. It's going to hurt, Sara."

I thought about the long, hollow nights. I thought about the way the box fed my darkest fantasies. How it took my rage, polished it, and handed it back to me like a sharpened blade. It had been my only friend when I was lonely. My silent partner in every grudge. My weapon against a world that had tried to break me.

Max was right. Letting it go would feel like losing a friend.

A toxic, predatory, soul-eating friend.

"I'm sure," I said, my voice finally finding its steel. "I want my life back. I want it gone."

Max nodded slowly. "Then we finish this. Tonight. Together."

The bridge

Charles Bridge at midnight. During the day, it was a postcard. A tourist trap. A stage for caricaturists and bad accordion players. At night? It was a graveyard of shadows.

The crowds had vanished into the winding alleys of Old Town. The vendors had packed up their trinkets and gone home to their Pilsners. Now, the famous statues loomed in the ink-black darkness like silent sentinels, stone saints judging the sins of the city.

A wall of white fog rolled off the Vltava River. It was thick. Choking. It swallowed the streetlights at either end until the bridge ceased to be a landmark and became its own private, claustrophobic world.

Sara stood at the dead centre. She was shivering, and it wasn't just the Czech winter. She clutched her handbag like a lifeline, her knuckles white as bone. Beside her, Max was a statue of his own. He scanned the swirling mist, his eyes darting, looking for a ghost.

"She's late," Sara whispered. Her voice cracked.

"She'll come," Max said. His voice was like gravel under a boot.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because those boxes are her children, Sara. Her twisted, wooden offspring. She can't resist when one of them finally crawls back home to Mummy."

The fog shifted. For a heartbeat, Sara saw a figure at the far end of the bridge, tall, slender and as motionless as the stone. Then, a blink, and it was gone. Just a trick of the light and the damp.

"Did you see that?"

Max nodded. "She's here. Stay sharp."

They waited. The river whispered below them, black, cold, and hungry. Time didn't just slow down;

it stopped. And then, without a footfall or a breath of warning, *she* was there.

The Collector.

She stood ten feet away, watching them with eyes that had seen empires rise and crumble into dust. She looked young, maybe thirty, with porcelain skin and dark hair pulled back tight. She was beautiful, but it was the kind of beauty that made your blood run cold. Because her eyes? Her eyes were ancient.

"You brought it," she said. Her voice was a low, melodic purr with an accent that tasted of old Europe and forgotten languages. "After all these centuries, you finally brought my child home."

"Your child?" Sara's grip tightened on the bag. "This thing is a monster."

"The box? I birthed it long ago. Before your grandparents' grandparents were even a thought." The Collector smiled. It was a cold, jagged thing. "You've been nurturing it, Sara. I can see its mark on your skin. It's written in the way you breathe."

"I haven't been nurturing it," Sara hissed. "I've been trying to survive it. I've been trying to rip it out of my life."

"And yet, you kept it close. You fed it. You gave it a feast of your anger, your despair and your delicious hatred." The Collector's gaze flicked to Max, sharp as a razor. "And you. I remember you. The arrogant little man. The one who thought he could play with my creation without getting burnt."

"I was a fool," Max said. "I'm not that man anymore."

"Aren't you? Do you truly grasp the weight of what you've done? What you've *fattened*?" The Collector glided forward, her boots making no sound on the ancient cobblestones. "That box has gorged itself on more darkness than any I've crafted in three hundred years. Your darkness. Both of you. It's bloated. It's happy. And now you expect me to just... take it back?"

"Yes."

Sara stepped forward. She reached into her bag and pulled out the box. It wasn't just wood anymore. It blazed with a sickening heat. It throbbed with a rhythmic pulse that felt like a heartbeat. It was *angry*.

"Take it," Sara demanded. "Destroy it. Cast it into the river. I don't care. Just get this rot away from us."

The Collector looked at the box. Then she looked at Sara. For the first time, a spark of genuine respect flickered in those depthless eyes.

"You're actually willing to let go," the woman mused. "Most aren't. They come to me weeping, begging for salvation. But when the moment of truth arrives, they clutch it to their chests. The box becomes them. They'd rather die than be empty again."

"I'd rather be empty than be a vessel for this," Sara said.

"Would you, truly?" The Collector held out a pale, slender hand. "Then give it to me. Now. Before the hunger wins."

Sara reached out. The box began to scream, not a sound but a vibration that tore through her bones. It pushed against her palm, fighting her. It flooded her mind with visions. A kaleidoscope of everything she'd ever craved. Max, on his knees, begging for her. Her enemies, ruined and broken. A life of absolute power. Total revenge.

Keep me, the box hissed inside her skull. *I can make you a god.*

"No," Sara whispered.

She opened her hand.

The box fell.

And the world exploded into white.

The unmaking

Sara hit the tarmac hard. Her skull rattled like a jar of marbles. Her vision didn't just swim; it drowned in a sea of crimson. Above, the sky was the colour of a fresh arterial spray, and the bridge fog had curdled into something far worse. They were human shapes, vague, smoky silhouettes, reaching for her with elongated fingers that looked like jagged icicles.

"The box!" Max's voice was a frantic rasp, barely audible over the roar in her ears. "It's fighting back, Sara! It's bloody fighting back!"

She forced her eyes to focus. In the eye of the storm stood the Collector. She was a pillar of stillness amidst a whirlwind of shadow and strobe-light. She gripped the box with white-knuckled intensity, her face a rigid mask of sheer, agonizing concentration. Around her, the fog-wraiths surged, their touch leaving trails of frost that hissed against the metal of the bridge.

“It’s stronger than I calculated,” the Collector screamed, her voice cutting through the gale. “You fed it a feast, Sara. You fed it well!”

“I didn’t mean to!” Sara scrambled up, her boots skidding on the slick pavement. “How do we kill it? What do we do?”

“Help me hold the line. Both of you! Grab my hands and *think* of letting go. Strip your mind bare. Think of absolutely nothing else!”

Max didn’t hesitate. He dived forward, seizing the Collector’s left hand. Sara took a jagged breath, then lunged, grabbing the right.

The instant their skin met, the bridge vanished.

Sara wasn’t just looking at the box anymore. She was *inside* the damn thing.

It wasn’t a metaphor. It was a cold, hard reality.

She stood in a cathedral of infinite darkness. It was a void that smelled of old copper and wet earth. Everywhere she turned, there were shadows. Her shadows. Max’s shadows. The twisted, psychic residue of every poor soul who had clutched this box over the centuries. They writhed like a pit of vipers,

reaching for her with a desperate, starving energy. In their touch, she felt it all: every petty grudge, every murderous impulse, every dark fantasy that had ever nourished this parasite.

You birthed us, the shadows hissed. The sound was like dry leaves skittering over a gravestone. *You fed us your heart. You loved us. Don't leave us in the cold now.*

"I never loved you." Sara's voice didn't just echo; it boomed in the emptiness. "I loved the taste of my own bitterness. I loved the way it felt to imagine Max's life being snuffed out. But that wasn't love for you. You're just a crowbar. A tool. A means to a filthy end."

We gave you the power of a god, the shadows wailed, their forms flickering. *We gave you your pound of flesh. We gave you...*

"You gave me nothing I didn't already have!" Sara stepped into the swarm, her eyes blazing. "The hate? That was all mine. The rage? Hand-crafted. The despair? I built that brick by brick. You just... you were the megaphone. You just made the noise louder."

She looked at them then, really looked at them.

They weren't monsters. They were parasites. Pathetic, starving things clinging to the underside of a human soul. "You aren't powerful," she spat. "You're just *needy*."

The shadows let out a collective shriek that nearly burst her eardrums.

The void began to shudder. The very fabric of the darkness was tearing at the seams.

From a million miles away, she heard the Collector's voice, sharp as a razor: *Now! While it's reeling. Push, damn you! Push!*

Sara didn't push against the wraiths. She pushed against the architecture of the void itself. She pushed against the very idea that this thing had a right to exist. She poured in every ounce of her stubborn, iron-willed refusal. The refusal to be a puppet. The refusal to be a battery for some ancient, sentient malice.

To her left, she felt Max. He wasn't just pushing; he was shoving with the strength of a man who had stared into his own grave and decided he wasn't ready to jump. And beyond him, the Collector, ancient, formidable and so very tired. A mother weary of watching her creations devour the world.

Together, they struck.

The box didn't just break. It groaned. It screamed. It *cracked*.

Light exploded. Not the sickly, neon glow of the box, but real light. Golden. Warm. Radiant. It tore through the darkness like a blowtorch through tissue paper. The shadows thrashed, dissolving into grey mist as the heat of the light consumed them.

No! the box wailed, a thousand voices crying out in a final, dissonant chord. *No! I am the end! I am eternal! I am...*

"You are nothing," the Collector's voice rang out, cold and final. "You were a mistake that lasted too long. Goodbye."

The box shattered.

And then, there was only silence.

Consequences

The fog didn't just lift; it surrendered.

Sara's eyelids felt like lead weights. She blinked once, twice, and the world snapped into a sharp, terrifying focus. She was lying on the ancient stone of Charles Bridge. It was cold. Cold as a grave. Her head was cradled in Max's lap, and for a heartbeat, she forgot why her soul felt like it had been put through a meat grinder.

Above them, the Prague sky was finally bleeding out the last of the grey. The stars were coming out, cold, distant and indifferent.

A few feet away stood the Collector. She wasn't a monster anymore. She just looked like a woman who had lived too many lives and hated every single one of them. In her cupped palms, she held a pile of fine, shimmering grey dust.

"It's done," the woman whispered. Her voice was like dry parchment rubbing together. "It's finally, mercifully, done."

Sara tried to sit up. Her muscles screamed. Gravity felt like a personal insult. She collapsed back, then tried again, fueled by a sudden, jagged shot of adrenaline. Max's hand was there, solid, warm and trembling just a fraction. He pulled her up, his arm a steel band around her shoulders.

"What happened?" Sara rasped. Her throat tasted like copper and smoke. "Max, did we...?"

"The box is gone, Sara. Truly gone." The Collector looked down at the dust. For the first time, the predatory glint in those ancient eyes had been replaced by something far more dangerous: grief. "I made it in a fever of red-hot rage. Centuries ago. A man I loved, a man I would have burned the world for, betrayed me. I wanted him to suffer. I wanted his own mind to become his executioner."

She paused, a ghost of a shudder wracking her thin frame.

"I forged a vessel that would turn a soul's darkest whispers into a choir of demons. But malice is a poor architect, Sara. It never builds what you intend."

"What happened to him?" Sara asked, her voice steadying.

"He didn't just use it. He fed it. He let it consume him until there was no man left, only the hunger of the box." The Collector closed her hands tight, a final act of execution. When she opened them, the wind caught the dust. It vanished into the night. "I've spent five hundred years trying to kill my own children. Twelve boxes. Twelve plagues. Yours... yours was the last."

"Why?" Max's voice was a low growl. "If you knew the body count, why keep pulling the trigger?"

The Collector turned her gaze on him. It was the saddest smile Sara had ever seen, a jagged wound of a smile.

"Because anger is a deaf god, Max. It doesn't listen to reason. Because when grief is screaming in your ear, you don't care who gets caught in the blast. Every time I thought I'd paid my debt to the world, someone new would twist the knife. I'd forget the lessons. I'd forget the blood. I only remembered the need to make them *bleed*."

She looked at her empty palms, her shoulders

slumping. The weight of five centuries finally settling in.

"I am not a hero in this story, Sara. I am just an old woman who ran out of mistakes to make."

Max helped Sara to her feet. She leaned into him, her legs feeling like overcooked noodles. She looked at the woman who had orchestrated their living nightmare, waiting for the hatred to flare up. It didn't. There was only a hollow, exhausted pity.

"Thank you," Sara said. The words felt heavy, but she meant them. "For ending it."

"Don't thank me. Thank yourselves for having the spine to let go." The Collector studied them, her eyes scanning their faces like she was reading a final chapter. "Most people hug the darkness until it smothers them. They'd rather keep their pain than be empty. But you two... you chose the emptiness."

She looked at Max, a flicker of something like respect crossing her face. "Even you, my arrogant friend. You finally learned that some battles are won by dropping the sword."

"I had a better reason to stay than to fight," Max said. He pulled Sara closer, his thumb tracing a line

on her arm. “I had good help.”

The Collector smiled. This time, it wasn’t a mask. It was small, tired, and achingly human. “Then perhaps there’s hope for the rest of us. Even the monsters.”

She turned without another word and walked toward the Old Town end of the bridge. The fog began to swirl around her ankles, thickening, reaching up like eager hands. Sara watched her go, and for a split second, she saw shadows dancing at the edge of the mist. They weren’t the box’s shadows. They were older. More patient.

They looked like they had been waiting a long, long time for her to come home.

“Will she be okay?” Sara whispered, watching the silhouette fade.

“I don’t know,” Max said, his eyes fixed on the spot where she disappeared. “But she’s not our ghost anymore. We’ve got enough of our own.”

They stood on the bridge as the silence of Prague settled around them. The last six months had been a marathon through hell, but as the stars sharpened overhead, the crushing weight on Sara’s chest began to crack.

They walked off the bridge hand in hand. No one spoke.

The silence wasn't empty. It was finally, beautifully, quiet.

The return

Three days.

That's all it took for my apartment on 74th Street to become a crime scene where the only thing murdered was my past.

I stood in the center of the living room, heart hammering a rhythm I didn't recognize. I knew the furniture. I knew the spines of the books on the shelves, the dusty knick-knacks, the frozen smiles in the photos on the wall. They were all there. But the *vibe*? The vibe had shifted.

The oppressive heaviness that used to sit on my chest like a lead weight? Gone. The shadows lurking in the corners weren't monsters anymore, they were just physics. Light hitting matter. The silence didn't scream at me. It just... sat there.

"You feel it too, don't you, you furry freeloader?"

Louie wound around my ankles, a tuxedo-patterned blur of purrs and ego. He arched his back, pressing into my shins as if to say, *About time you got us back to a zip code with decent salmon.* Mrs. Kwan hadn't wanted to let him go. At the deli, Louie had been more than a cat; he was a local celebrity, a four-legged bouncer who cleared the aisles of mice and charmed the change out of every customer's pocket.

"You look different, Sara," Mrs. Kwan had told me, her eyes narrowing behind her thick spectacles as she handed over the carrier. She looked like she was searching for a scar that hadn't healed. "Lighter. Like you dropped a suitcase full of bricks."

"I did, Mrs. Kwan," I said, and the truth of it tasted sweet. "I'm much lighter."

"Good. Lighter is harder to catch. Lighter is good."

Now, I scooped Louie up, feeling the solid, vibrating warmth of him against my ribs. I walked to the window and threw it open. The city rushed in, a cocktail of budding spring, burnt rubber, and overpriced espresso. It smelled like New York. It smelled like *life*.

Then, the buzz.

My phone vibrated on the counter like a rattlesnake. I didn't even have to look.

Max.

You okay?

The three dots danced. I stared at them, my breath catching. We'd ended it at the airport in Prague. A messy, jagged goodbye in a terminal that smelled like jet fuel and regret. He was heading back to Clair, back to the life he'd stitched together while I was falling apart. I was coming back to me.

I gripped the phone. My thumbs hovered.

I'm okay, I typed. *You?*

The reply was a long time coming. I could almost see him sitting in some sterile kitchen, typing and deleting, his forehead furrowed in that way that used to make me want to kiss him.

Clair and I are talking. Really talking. I don't know if the bridge is burnt or just scorched, but...

But you're trying, I shot back.

Yeah, the blue bubble popped up. *I'm trying. Harder than I ever have.*

Good, I told him. *Keep trying. Don't look back, Max.*

A silence stretched across the cellular network. Then: *Thank you, Sara. For the wake-up call. For everything.*

I didn't reply. What was left to say? I'd already performed the autopsy on our relationship. There were no more secrets to dig out.

I set the phone face down on the mahogany table, *my* table. This wasn't the place where Max had walked out. It wasn't the tomb of a dead romance. It was just an apartment. And for the first time in three years, it was mine.

I felt a cool breeze hit the back of my neck. Peace.

It was a fickle guest, I knew that. It wouldn't stay forever. In New York, peace has a shorter shelf life than milk. But right now? In this heartbeat?

It was enough.

The collector's daughter

Six months later, the package arrived. No return address. No clues.

Sara stared at it on her doorstep. Her skin crawled. After the hell of the last year, an unmarked box wasn't a gift, it was a threat. She almost tossed it straight into the incinerator. But the weight was wrong for a trap. It felt solid. Grounded. It didn't pulse with that oily, familiar dread of a conjuring box.

She took it inside.

She peeled back the tape with a kitchen knife, her heart thudding against her ribs like a trapped bird. Inside, nestled in layers of white tissue paper, was a wooden figurine. A woman. Her arms were flung wide, her face tilted toward a sky she couldn't see.

It was exquisite. Delicate but unbreakable. When Sara's fingers brushed the wood, she didn't feel the icy bite of a curse. She felt warmth. Just wood. Just art.

Then she saw the note.

Dear Sara,

I've spent the last six months doing something I haven't done in five hundred years, I've been breathing. No boxes to hunt. No ancient stains to scrub from my soul. No darkness to babysit. Just... existing.

It's bloody terrifying. It's also the best thing I've ever done.

I carved this for you. It's the first thing I've created since I stopped making cages. There's no magic in it, Sara. I've burnt those bridges. It's just me. Or the version of me I might have been if I hadn't spent centuries looking for monsters in the mirror.

Keep it. Let it remind you that our worst days don't define us. It's the walk we take after the fire that matters.

Yours, The Collector

P.S. — Call me Elena. It feels like a name that belongs to a living woman.

Sara held the figurine for a long time. It sat in her palm, heavy and honest. No shadows whispered in her ear. No ghosts flickered in the corner of her vision.

She placed it on her nightstand, right where the nightmare had once sat. A changing of the guard.

She grabbed her phone and dialled Max. He picked up on the second ring.

"Sara? Is everything alright?" His voice was sharp, wired for an emergency.

"Everything's fine, Max. Better than fine. I got a delivery today. From Elena."

"Elena? Who the hell is Elena?"

"The Collector," Sara said, a small smile tugging at her mouth. "She's retired the title. She's got a name now."

Silence on the other end. Then, a long, ragged exhale. "Is it... safe?"

"It's just wood, Max. No tricks. No teeth. She's okay. Which means we're okay."

"That's... wow. That's a lot to take in." Max paused, and Sara could hear the muffled sounds of a domestic life in the background. A kettle whistling. A door closing. "That's brilliant, Sara. Genuinely."

"How's Clair holding up?"

"She's a fighter," Max said, his voice softening. "We're both still looking over our shoulders, mind you. Every time the floorboards creak, we think the house is about to eat us. But we're trying. That's the trick, isn't it? Just keep bloody trying."

"Right."

"Look," Max said, his tone turning eager. "Clair wants to meet the woman who stared down a magical murder box and didn't blink. Dinner? Next week? My treat."

Sara laughed. It felt strange in her chest, light, airy, real. "I'd like that, Max. I'd really like that."

"Sorted. I'll text you the details. Stay safe, Sara."

"You too."

She clicked off the phone.

Louie, her ginger tom, didn't care about ancient curses or redemptive woodcarvings. He jumped onto the duvet and hammered his head against her hand, demanding his tribute. He looked at her with those big, unblinking amber eyes, his purr sounding like a tiny, muffled chainsaw.

"Yeah, I know," Sara murmured, scratching that perfect spot behind his ears. "I think we're going to be just fine, Louie."

The cat squinted at her, the feline equivalent of a shrug, and settled into a loaf.

Outside, Manhattan was screaming. Sirens, the rhythmic thrum of the subway beneath the pavement, the chaotic symphony of eight million people trying to get somewhere. It was ordinary. It was loud. It was beautiful.

Sara took the figurine and moved it to the windowsill. She wanted the morning sun to hit it first.

Then she headed to the kitchen. Coffee to brew. A cat to feed. A life to live.

No magic required.

Epilogue

Prague. One year later.

The fog didn't just roll off the Vltava; it breathed. It crawled up the ancient stone of Charles Bridge like a living thing, cold and damp, smelling of old myths and drowned secrets.

Elena stood at the midpoint, her back to the blackened statues. She liked it here. This was the spot where she'd finally broken the cycle. Where she'd shattered her greatest mistake and watched the pieces sink into the dark water. It was a monument to the impossible. A reminder that even after three centuries of chasing shadows, a soul could still find its way home.

Then the hair on her neck prickled.

She wasn't alone.

A figure materialised from the grey soup. A girl. Twenty, maybe twenty-one. She walked with the frantic, jagged gait of someone who had forgotten how to sleep. In her arms, she cradled a bundle wrapped in velvet as if it were a wounded bird.

Elena saw the signs. She knew the twitch of the eyelid, the way the girl's eyes hunted for monsters in the peripheral vision. She knew the look of a person who was being eaten from the inside out by a secret.

"Are you the Collector?" the girl whispered. Her voice was thin, ready to snap like dry glass.

"Not anymore." Elena's smile was a soft, tired thing. She stepped forward, keeping her hands visible. "That version of me died on this bridge. But I can help you, Nina."

The girl flinched. "How do you know my name?"

"Because I know the weight of what you're carrying. I know how it hums against your skin when the sun goes down. Whatever it's done to you, I can make it stop."

Nina's hands trembled. She peeled back the velvet.

Nestled in the fabric was a small black box. It was a twin to the one Elena had sent to the bottom of the river a year ago. Obsidian-dark. Cold enough to burn. But this one was… *younger*. It lacked the jagged, hungry aura of its predecessor. It hadn't tasted enough blood yet.

"I found it in my grandmother's attic," Nina stammered, her breath hitching. "She spent her last breath screaming at me to burn it. To smash it. But the hammers just… they just bounce off. It won't break, Elena. And now I'm hearing things. Voices that sound like her, but they aren't her."

Elena looked at the box. The familiar, oily pull of the void tugged at her gut. For a heartbeat, the old hunger flared, the desire to own it, to study it, to let it consume her.

Then she looked at the girl. She saw the raw terror in Nina's eyes and felt the crushing weight of a responsibility she thought she'd escaped.

Hope. Guilt. Destiny. They were all the same thing in the end.

"It's a long story, Nina. A story that starts in a cellar

in 1720 and ends right here," Elena said. She reached out, her fingers brushing the girl's cold hand. "But the good news is, I've had three hundred years of practice. We have time. We have all the time in the world."

Elena took the girl's hand, her grip firm and grounding. She led her away from the parapet, away from the silent, stone witnesses of the bridge, and into the heart of the fog.

Behind them, the statues of saints watched with blind, pitiless eyes.

Above, the stars wheeled in their cold, indifferent orbits.

The old story was dead. But in the shadows of the Golden City, a new one was just beginning to scream.

THE END

Conjuring boxes

Thanos Kalamidas

Ovi eBook Publishing 2026

Ovi eBook Publishing
Design: Thanos

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"Show me," she whispered. "Show me everything."

CONJURING BOXES

Thanos Kalamidas, a multipublished writer, cartoonist and illustrator; born and grew up in a picturesque neighbourhood on the mountainside of Hymettus in Athens, Greece. Then his life took him to Berlin, Germany and to London, UK for studies. After a brief stay in Yorkshire he moved his life to Paris, France while working in Tokyo, Japan and in Cape Town, South Africa. In the last 25 years he became a permanent Scandinavian resident and recently, in his glorious sixth decade, he moved to a scenic village in the Växjö area.

THANOS KALAMIDAS